

Gifts and Acquisitions in Context

Museum collections grow through gifts and purchases that reflect the generosity of patrons and the judgment of the professional staff. Gifts have played a crucial and sustaining role in the building of the Whitney Museum's Permanent Collection of twentieth-century American art. They have been especially numerous this year, many of them donated in honor of the Museum's sixtieth anniversary. This exhibition presents these gifts and acquisitions (both marked by a small star on their labels) in the context of related works already in the collection. Chronological comparisons of style, evolving content, and influence are made apparent. Now totaling about 9,500 paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, video installations, and photographs, the collection is the largest and most definitive assembly of twentieth-century American art. It is the Museum's principal asset. When acquiring works for the collection, the Museum assumes responsibility to maintain, conserve, and, if necessary, to restore works while making them accessible for research, study, and exhibition. A selection of objects from the collection is always on view here as well as at branch museums and in traveling exhibitions organized by the Whitney Museum. The Museum also lends to scores of American and foreign institutions each year. The remainder of the collection is stored off-site. Whether contemporary or historical, each addition expands, informs, and revises the collection and our understanding of the visual arts in modern America.

Whitney Museum of American Art

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The history of the Whitney Museum's Permanent Collection spans

the greater part of our century and reflects the changes in patronage and taste that have occurred during this time. In this sense, the growth of the collection parallels that of the Museum.

In 1929 Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney offered her collection of works by American artists, which she had assembled over the previous twenty years through her patronage of living American artists, to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Though she had intended to build and endow a wing at the Metropolitan for these 400 works, her offer was rejected and she resolved to form a separate institution. In this same period, her peers Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie Bliss, and Mary Quinn Sullivan founded an institution for the exhibition of contemporary European art, which became The Museum of Modern Art.

The Whitney Museum of American Art opened to the public in three remodeled brownstones on **West 8th Street** in November 1931 with a collection augmented by an additional 100 pieces that Mrs. Whitney had acquired in an effort to both broaden and deepen her now public holdings. They reflected Mrs. Whitney's taste and that of Juliana Force—her longtime assistant and the Museum's first director. The nucleus of the collection comprised paintings in the figurative style akin to the sculpture Mrs. Whitney herself created. All the acquisitions and operational expenses were paid for by Mrs. Whitney until her death in 1942. And the institution's *de facto* policy of collecting a variety of works by many artists, rather than concentrating on a small group, remained in effect, as it would for another thirty years.

In 1943 a merger with The Metropolitan Museum of Art was announced, a move prompted by growing concerns about the Whitney Museum's continued financial viability after Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's death. The negotiations evolved into the "Three Museum Agreement" of 1947, which delineated the collection and exhibition priorities of the three major museums in New York. The Metropolitan Museum would continue in the tradition of "classic," historical art, The Museum of Modern Art would focus its activities on twentieth-century American and European modernism, and the Whitney Museum of American Art would continue to devote itself

solely to American art. In addition, the Whitney Museum would build and endow a wing at the Metropolitan to house its collection. In 1948, however, the agreement was abandoned. The Whitney feared that it would be unable to retain its distinct identity, especially in the face of the Metropolitan's continuing antagonism toward contemporary American art. That same year, Juliana Force died.

At the end of this first era in the Museum's history, the collection numbered about 1500 objects, all of them donated by Mrs. Whitney or purchases with her funds. Hermon More, one of the Museum's curators, was appointed director and the first gift to the collection—Ben Shahn's *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*

(1931–32)—was accepted. Under More's direction, the Museum maintained its bias toward representational art, and its programs and modest funds for acquisitions continued to serve a community of artists, many of whom had been allied with the institution from its earliest days.



The Whitney Museum moved in 1954 to a new building on **West 54th**

Street erected on land given by and ad-

adjacent to The Museum of Modern Art. Funds for the building came from the Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney Trust. Both museums emphasized that the gift was in no way indicative of a merger. The move afforded greater exhibition and storage space for the Whitney's collection and positioned it in the center of the city. Operating costs assumed an increased percentage of the Museum's expenses, to the detriment of its exhibition schedule and acquisitions. In 1956, organized public support for the Museum was established with the founding of the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art. The primary purpose of this group of collectors and other patrons was to secure funds for acquisitions. In a close working relationship with the curatorial staff, the Friends suggested works for acquisition and soon became the principal source of funds, in this way expanding the Museum's Permanent Collection. For nearly two decades, the Friends continued the Museum's policy of collecting a broad range of work. Their enthusiasm for new art, along with the leadership of Lloyd Goodrich, director from 1958 to 1968, and John I.H. Baur, director from 1968 to 1974, garnered important additions of both Abstract Expressionism and Pop for the collection.

By the early 1960s, the Museum had substantially expanded its collection, outgrowing the 54th Street building. As an institution

it had matured from a private philanthropy to a public, world-renowned museum. With significant contributions from the Friends, the Museum's leaders set their sights on the upper East Side.

The present building, designed by Marcel Breuer, was opened in 1966. Under Lloyd Goodrich and his successor, John I.H. Baur, the Friends continued to play a central role in providing funds for acquisitions. Other significant donations came from Josephine N. Hopper, who in 1968 bequeathed Edward Hopper's artistic estate—the largest gift in the Museum's history. Ten years later, the Museum received a bequest of a large number of Reginald Marsh's works from Felicia Marsh. Both donations were the result of a long association each artist had with the Museum. Important gifts of sculpture were given by Howard and Jean Lipman in the 1960s and 1970s (with additions last year) and a large bequest of paintings came from Lawrence H. Bloedel. Under the directorship of Tom Armstrong (1974–90), the Museum focused attention on the Permanent Collection, promoting research and organizing a number of exhibitions around it. Multiple examples of work by artists deemed especially important were added to the collection and featured in a series of shows that concentrated on each artist's works. From 1981 to 1990 a comprehensive selection of works was on view at all times.

With the organization of the Painting and Sculpture Committee in 1968 and later committees for prints (1969–75, 1983–present) and drawings (formed in 1976), funds for acquisitions have increased. Committee members, through dues, underwrite purchases presented to them by the Museum's curators. David A. Ross, director since 1991, has organized a committee on photographs that has begun to discuss the formation of a photography collection.

Overseeing the Permanent Collection has become a responsibility shared among the curators. The Museum's ongoing commitment to the collection continues to grow. In the coming years, a series of exhibitions will reveal the Permanent Collection's strengths and its ability to represent some of the most important moments in twentieth-century American art.



Fourth floor:



A floor plan of a gallery space. The space is divided into three main sections by horizontal lines. The top section contains a list of names. The middle section contains another list of names. The bottom section contains a third list of names. There are also some vertical lines and a small square on the right side of the middle section.

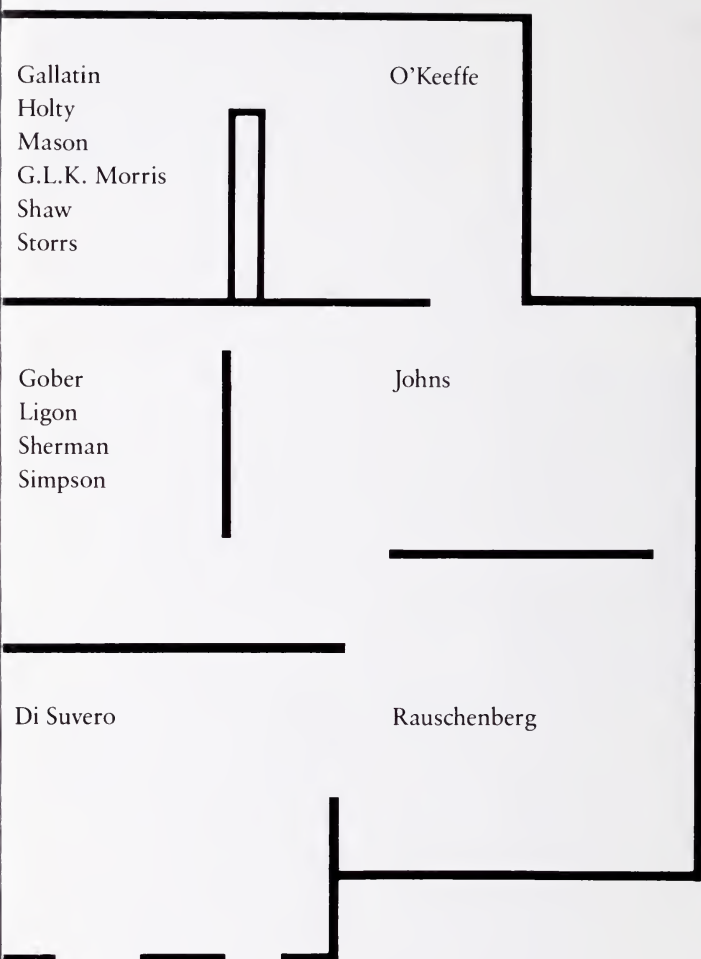
Cornell
Gottlieb
Graham
Gorky
Rothko

Benglis
R. Morris
Nauman
Tuttle

Basquiat
Byron
Kessler
Otterness
Winters

In the Lower Gallery:

George Bellows
Robert Colescott
Steve Gianakos
Manuel Neri
Jane Peterson
John Singer Sargent
Donald Sultan
Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney



Gifts and Acquisitions in Context is being
presented in three installations:

Part I May 22–July 5

Part II July 10–August 23

Part III August 29–September 20